A Mapping and Rhetorical Ecology Approach to Writing About Writing

This presentation focuses on the mapping elements built into this curriculum but a full syllabus, assignment sheets, and a detailed calendar can be found in the teaching materials portfolio at chellemcmullin.com. You can also see how this approach has unfolded over the course of the semester by browsing our class blog at engl106spring2015.wordpress.com

Pedagogical Goals:

- Devise multiple, connected ways for students to experience “writing is rhetorical practice” as a threshold concept.
- Help students to understand rhetorical situation in a more multimodal, networked, ecological, less static way than they might have learned it as sender-receiver-text or the rhetorical triangle of writer/audience/text/context (Edbauer, Rivers and Weber).
- Help students to think through their own literacy as an ecology rather than a linear storyline with commonplace sites (like high school classrooms) for exploration.
- Help students see their community research projects as research situated in an ecology (preferably one they see as an ecology of which they are a part).

Means:

- Use mapping as a recurring theme for making sense of ecology and tracing relationships
- Scaffold to make connections across projects so that students think of rhetorical analysis as visual and spatial as well as textual.
- Employ multiple mediums and give students flexibility in the modes and genres they choose for completing projects.

Outcomes: focus on ICaP outcomes

- The ability to describe composing processes (meta-language) and vary processes based on composing tasks
- Identify and state the purpose of writing tasks (Framed consistently as exigency and/or stakes)
- Adapt writing and genre choices for multiple audiences
- Evaluate and give commentary, as well as incorporate feedback based on commentary writers receive
- Understand visual rhetoric and make effective choices about when and how to select various modes and mediums of presentation.
Rationale:

My pedagogy is, of course, informed by the ICaP framework and the Writing about Writing syllabus approach as it is outlined in our program, and also in the way it is outlined in the introduction to Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle’s *Writing About Writing*.

At the same time (and drawing on my understanding of Wardle’s research and others) I wanted to help my students experience rhetoric as practice, as something you do. **Students don’t always think of writing as an activity that happens in the world. They think of writing as an assignment.** Students also don’t think about rhetoric as verb, and I wanted to give them a way to think about that by asking them to *do rhetoric* by making maps. We started the semester with a few basic ideas that we have returned to throughout our projects:

- **How do we define rhetoric?** (Every new unit begins with time to rethink and share our working definitions of rhetoric).
- **What does it mean to say “writing is rhetorical practice?”** (This is a recurring question in reflective assignments and project proposals).
- **How do we understand rhetorical situations as an ecology?**
- **How do we map the relationships between all the stuff, as Jenny Edbauer says “the bloody mess of rhetoric,” that makes up an ecology?**
- **How do we explain and analyze what we see through mapping?**

We get better at what we practice. We develop mastery—flexibility, confidence, authority, and access—when we know how to talk about and evaluate what we practice.

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Assignment Sequence

3 Major Assignments and a final course reflection. Each assignment sequence has smaller writing opportunities and mapping projects designed to build toward larger writing tasks.

- Writing Self Study
- Community Research Report
- Remediation and Circulation Project
- Remapping Reflection

Four Mapping Activities
Mapping as a Generative Assignment: Narrative Mapping

This narrative map assignment comes at the beginning of the writing self-study sequence. The assignment is designed to help students think spatially in order to make more concrete the metaphor of rhetorical ecology, and to begin to generate questions for further inquiry in their writing self-study.

Prior to the narrative mapping assignment students read:

- Jenny Edbauer’s “Unframing Models of Public Distribution: From Rhetorical Situation to Rhetorical Ecology"
- “Revisualizing Composition” Jeff Grabill, et all (The WIDE study on the writing lives of college students as published in Writing About Writing)
- Nancy Sommers essay “I Stand Here writing” (Also from Writing About Writing)

Process:
In class, students began with a writing prompt:
Using a set of lists, think about each of the following as they relate to your writing life. Write as many things as you can.

(I wrote with my students, using the doc cam so they could see the kinds of things I generated.)

- **Exigencies**— what’s most important to you right now as a writer
- **Literacies**— what are you pretty good at? What skills/ways of knowing/learning do you have pretty good control of (these need not specifically be writing literacies)
- **Influences**— who/where/what has influenced your learning along the way.
- **Experiences**— what moments in your history have most shaped you (maybe as a writer, or maybe more in general).

Any theoretical discourse that is entitled to be called "rhetoric" must at minimum conceive of rhetoric as an art of invention, that is, it must give a central place to the systematic discovery and investigation of the available arguments in a given situation. Furthermore, it must conceive of the arguments generated by rhetorical invention as both produced and circulated within a network of social and civic discourse, images, and events.

--From "Composition is not Rhetoric" by Sharon Crowley
**MODELING IN ACTION:** After about 10 minutes of writing, students were given posters and markers and asked to think about how to represent these lists on a map. I began by modeling for my students how I might start my own map by drawing under the doc cam so they could watch while I talked through my process out loud. After a few minutes of modeling I showed students a map I completed prior to class. Over the course of three class periods (two in class and one in the lab) students created their narrative maps and then gave short presentations to their classmates explaining their maps by focusing on the possible research questions their maps helped them generate for exploration in their writing self-study.

**Next Steps:** After completing and presenting their maps, students were asked to use an organizing grid as a heuristic to think through their research questions, our class reading and discussions, and their maps in order to choose an approach for their Writing Self Study Assignments.

**Reflection:** Next time I teach this sequence I’ll spend more time having students generate their lists before making their maps. I can imagine using the lists as a way to help students do more reflective reading as they are reading the WIDE study and “I Stand Here Writing.” Students struggled with Exigencies and Literacies as concrete rather than abstract concepts. The short, in-class writing time wasn’t enough for most students.

While students in general responded favorably to the mapping project, I had a few students who had a hard time making connections between their maps and the larger writing project. In repeating this sequence I would spend more in-class time with the heuristic grids and maybe less time having students present their maps to the class. Students had difficulty moving past explanation of their maps to analysis of their maps as a text.
Mapping for context and scaffolding: (Fictional) Community Mapping

This activity is a three day sequence of classes designed to transition from the writing self-study project so students could start thinking about mapping as a tool for research and community analysis. Fictional community mapping was a low stakes way to model for students how I wanted them to approach their community research.

Prior to this activity students read:

- Donna Kain and Elizabeth Wardle “Activity Theory: An Introduction” (WAW)
- Charles Bazerman “Speech Acts, Genres, and Activity Systems” (WAW)
- Hilary Janks Doing Critical Literacy Ch 1 and 2 (Available through Purdue E-library)
- Hilary Janks “Orientations to Literacy” from Literacy and Power

Process:

Drawing on their previous experience of narrative mapping and several days of class discussion about that above texts I asked students to do the following.

- Working in pairs, students identified a fictional community they knew well, then chose a theoretical approach, or combination of approaches based on course readings to map the community.
- Students worked together to draw maps. About half of the class used paper and markers, the other half used Prezi.
- Students were asked to use their maps to develop research questions based on their analysis of their community maps.
- Students were asked to outline a tentative research proposal, including possible sources/methods of primary and secondary research.
- Present their findings to the class in short 3-5 minute presentations.

**Modelling in Action:** Modeling for this assignment began several days before the activity in class discussion about the Kain and Wardle reading. We used Chipotle restaurants as a model and worked as a class to map it as an activity system. When I introduced the concept of mapping a fictional community and combining approaches to map the community we considered *Harry Potter* and Death Eaters by first briefly mapping them as an activity system, then considering how Bazerman terms like social facts would help us to clarify information we couldn’t get at with the activity map alone.
Next Steps: Students worked in pairs over the course of two class periods to develop their maps, then develop a basic research proposal, including a research question and suggestions for how they would begin primary and secondary research based on the communities they chose. The second day of mapping was mostly studio time, but I did begin the class with some questions and prompts based on their previous in class work to help guide their process.

Reflection: This was an incredibly successful activity. Students had fun, did great work and were obviously engaging their topics and how they might approach those topics through research, but when students began their community research projects much of the creativity and invention work they did with their fictional communities did not transfer to the way they approached their actual community research projects.

Next time I teach this sequence I will incorporate more low-road transfer by asking students to mirror this mapping process in their initial project proposals rather than assuming students will make the connections and do the mapping on their own. As is often the case with new concepts, students will experiment but then retreat quickly to already established ways of working as soon as they are able. I will spend more time in the future building explicit connections so that students see mapping as less of a novelty and more as a methodology for approaching community research.
Mapping as Evaluation: Rubric Design

For our final unit students are focusing on repurposing, revision and redesign in order to focus on a new audience. The assignment is to take something they have worked on previously in class and repurpose, expand or revise that project for a new audience, using new mediums or modes of composing. The other requirement for the project is that they must consider how their final project will circulate in an audience beyond our classroom. (This assignment takes as a model the task-based assignment structure Jody Shipka advocates in her article, “A Multi-Modal Task Based Frame for Composing.”)

Students’ projects will vary greatly based on their interests, the focuses and topics that have emerged for them over the semester, and their interest in engaging with different kinds of audiences and composing processes. For this unit we will approach grading rubrics as another kind of rhetorical mapping.

Process:
Over the course of the final project we will spend three class periods crafting a final rubric together using the assignment sheets, the ICaP GMOs, previous rubrics, and students understanding of their own goals and needs to develop a rubric to guide their work. Jenny Edbauer describes rhetorical ecology as a concatenation of texts. This has been a complex metaphor for students to grasp in tangible ways, so we will use the rubric building project as a way to experience what it means for an argument (in this case an argument for how to evaluate students’ work) emerges from a concatenation of texts, people, and exigencies.

Modeling in Action: Modeling for this project began during the first writing project of the semester. Students worked with me in class to develop the writing self-study rubric. They have already had experience making decisions about the weight of different aspects of an assignment, and how to develop descriptive language for evaluation.

Reflection: Unlike the previous two activities, this rubric design activity is still in process as I present at showcase. I have learned through previous rubric creation activities, both with this 106 class and my fall semester class that group rubric development takes a lot of time. This is why I’ve built several days into the schedule for this project. I’ve also spread those days out through the weeks we will be working on their remediation and circulation projects so that we will have time for reflection and revision. We will use this rubric design activity as a way to think about evaluation, reflection and revision as part of the writing process.

Mapping as Reflection

Process:
For the final writing project of the semester I am asking my students to redraw their narrative maps to reflect their writing experience in English 106. They will use these maps to write a one page reflection explaining how the tools they learned in this class are now entangled with the exigencies, literacies, influences and experiences they brought with them. Using their maps they will answer the question, how do you understand your own approach to writing as part of a rhetorical ecology?
Bibliography


Wardle, Elizabeth. ""Mutt Genres" and the Goal of FYC: Can We Help Students Write the Genres of the University?" *College Composition and Communication* (2009): 765-789.
